DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 716 CS 216 433

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TITLE Addressing Competing Rhetorical Demands in the Classroom: Using the Newsletter To Explore Student Roles as Writers, Students, and Intellectuals.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; Classroom Techniques; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; *Newsletters; Student Participation; *Student Publications; *Student Role; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Workshops
IDENTIFIERS Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

While recent arguments often propose that students should be engaged as writers in service to the larger community, the question remains how to engage students as intellectuals, writers, and creators of knowledge in an intellectual setting that mostly asks them to be passive learners. In Project Renaissance, leaving behind the familiar boundaries of freshman composition, a weekly newsletter was coordinated and worked on during workshop time, separate from the lecture component of the course. The students used the medium that they were given to pass messages to their audiences in ways that the instructor could not have coached them without the medium of an actual, multiplicitous audience. Each student was responsible throughout the semester for the production of approximately four newsletters. The newsletter engaged students in four different required activities: (1) a summary of the week's lectures; (2) a summary of the week's readings; (3) a report on what their peers in other sections of the course were doing; and (4) a list of questions to the lecture faculty in the course, addressing issues or concepts that they wanted clarified and connections they wanted made. The faculty's responses to the previous weeks' questions, when given, were printed. The challenge of competing rhetorical demands allowed the students to negotiate their roles as peer reporters, as well as producers of a product that would be viewed by faculty and assessed for a grade. (CR)

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ED 421 716

Lisa Mastrangelo

"Addressing Competing Rhetorical Demands in the Classroom: Using the Newsletter to Explore Student Roles as Writers, Students and Intellectuals."

While recent arguments often propose that students should be engaged as writers in service to larger community, the question remains how to engage students as intellectuals, writers, and creators of knowledge in an intellectual setting that mostly asks them to be passive learners. While the "research paper," the "mock" business letter, and other "dummy runs" have tried to orient students to different kinds of academic writing, the purpose of the assignments still remains the same: for the teacher to find fault with the students' work.

When I began teaching in Project Renaissance, and left the familiar boundaries of freshman composition, I began to search for ways in which student writing could serve the needs of the academic and social community that the students occupied. The result of this search was a weekly newsletter, to be coordinated and worked on during my workshop time, which was separate from a lecture component of the course. Each student was responsible throughout the semester for the production of approximately four newsletters. The newsletter engaged them in four different required activities. The first was a summary of the week's lectures, the second a summary of the week's readings. The third was a report on what their peers in other sections of the course were doing. The fourth was a list of questions to the lecture faculty in the course, addressing issues or concepts that they wanted clarified, and connections that they wanted made. In addition to this, the students printed the faculty's responses to the questions from the previous weeks. As well, they included their own "extras"--cartoons which were relevant to the week's lectures, creative titles, interviews, caricatures of their instructors, and even a Star Wars "match your faculty to the following characters" column. One student put it best--the comic relief "gave us a chance to [satirize] this large conglomeration of Chaos known as Project Renaissance."

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Their humor aside, their self-expression was telling. They used the medium that they were given to pass messages to their audiences in ways that I don't think I could have coached them towards without the medium of an actual, multiplicitous audience. The student power behind this project, the allowance for student voice and the authority which the students derived from it was interesting. In many ways, they ignored me in their text, which seemed somewhat unusual since they were being graded on the assignment by me One would think that they would feel that they were influencing me, and that they would alter their words to accommodate this. However, this was quite the opposite. I was very much a sideline player, and I emphasized to them that this was their creation, and that I was only there to help direct it. The result was that they did feel ownership towards their work. They realized that their work affected their classmates, and they wanted to ensure that, when they needed it, their classmates would produce quality work for them as well. They began to realize that their work was important to their peers. The more attention they paid to the lectures and readings in particular, the more information their peers would have to study from for exams and essays. As Chris put it, "If you didn't exactly understand what was going on in class, you could go to the news paper for answers. It was cool because I needed that when I was in the other groups. I could then pay those students back, so to speak, by helping them out when they were filling my shoes."

On the surface, the students mostly admitted only to influencing their peers in their writing. However, they also passed subtle messages on to their instructors. One student wrote a column solely of observations about the program, including a statement by Melissa, a fellow student, that "a positive part of a class structure is having interaction between the students and teacher; the more the professors are part of the discussions the more they will be able to understand how we are relating to the lectures."

As this example shows, the students in many ways were not only printing their own responses so that their peers could hear what they had to say, but they were also printing hints and instructions for their professors. Melissa's comment asks for more

interaction on the part of both the students and the instructors, complicating her notion of her audience. One of her peers, Jay, made a particularly telling statement after interviewing one of the professors, an extra inclusion which his group had devised. There had been numerous complaints throughout the year that the faculty were inaccessible to the students, and "just didn't care." At the end of some basic questions with the professor, Jay stated that "the professors are open to talk to you, but you have to take the initiative." As a freshman, and a part of a group of students many of whom would prefer to pass the responsibility for their own actions on to the backs of their instructors, this was a particularly mature statement. It is an interesting statement to juxtapose against the caricature of the very professor he was interviewing, which had been drawn by one of his classmates and appeared on the same page.

The students seemed to gain confidence in their relationships to one another as well as to their professors through the medium of the newsletter. It was the questions to the faculty section of the newsletter which gave the students a broader sense of their power as writers to address an outside audience. They were able to use the questions and answers as both a study guide for tests, a vehicle for better understanding what the lecture class and readings were about, and the realization of their own power and writers. Journalistic issues were introduced, as well as concepts of revision and editing. Although they were originally encouraged to be bold, it sometimes was difficult to prompt them in this way. Originally, one group did not receive any answers to the questions which they had e-mailed to their corresponding lecture professors. They responded in turn by simply not printing anything in the following newsletter. There was no explanation, there simply was no column of professor responses. Later, however, a different group in the same situation printed the following statement: "Unfortunately, no answers were provided by the Professors through e-mail." The power behind this statement is very interesting. The students, in a rhetorically sophisticated move, were almost attempting to "shame" their professors for not responding to them. Their use of the word "unfortunately" leads the

reader to believe that the students were actually upset by the failure of the faculty to respond. Whether this was because they were really interested in the faculty's answers to their questions, or whether they simply felt ignored by the lack of response is a different question. None-the-less, their statement did have a subtle impact, although they didn't observe it. The professor later indicated to me that she had not had time to respond to the students' questions. Later, when I shared her response with the students, I was surprised to find that they were quite pleased to hear it. My surprise stemmed from the fact that I sensed that their response was not so much because they wanted to gloat over the professor's failure, but instead the conversation was peppered with comment such as "the lecture professors really do read that thing, don't they?" They were pleased, indeed, that their work had been promised a wider audience and indeed had reached one.

A second telling example was printed in the question section of an even later newsletter. While there was a section in the newsletter solely addressing those faculty who had recently lectured, there was also a column titled "To all professors" in which the students directly addressed some of their complaints with the course through the medium of suggestion and question to the faculty. Here, through such statements as "we would like to do more group work" and their suggestions that they break into groups, the students were taking on more authority. Like Suzanne in Tom's class, who helped her peers through their web pages in an amazingly "teacher-like" way, my students began to take on the role of instructor as well, indicating the ways in which they preferred to have their classroom run and the ways in which the activities of the participants would enhance the overall experience of everyone involved.

It is often difficult to imagine how to make alternative public spaces available to students as writers. As I already mentioned, certain assignments which attempt to make these spaces available to students are merely that: attempts. These attempts become even more prevalent as the corporate world demands so-called "practical" skills from students. And yet, like grammar workshops do not help students write more grammatically correct

papers, dummy assignments such as fake business letters do not prepare students to later write in that genre in a more realistic setting. Susan Wells points out that we as composition instructors feel guilty for not exposing our students to more public forums. "As compositionists, we apply a deficit model to public discourse: it is one more thing students don't know, one more thing we have trouble teaching. But public space is not available, at least not in the form that we have imagined it" (Wells 327). Yet in re-creating an alternative public space for students, by allowing their humor and their work, and even more simply, their *writing* to be read by the director for the program, the dean, and the Vice-president of the entire State University, we *were* able to re-imagine such a space.

The newsletter actively engaged the students in the difficulties of a print technology that addresses a diverse audience. The challenge of competing rhetorical demands allowed the students to negotiate their roles as peer reporters, as well as producers of a product that would be viewed by faculty and assessed for a grade. As Tom's students re-imagined public spaces in different ways through the medium of the web, my students did so through print technology. While the newsletter is a more traditional medium, it none-the-less also enabled my students to see themselves as more active creators of discourse. Through this medium, they also had a place to report and record information about their own positions in the world, and to begin negotiating their identities as both youth culture and intellectuals within a university setting.